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The Klaus Barbie case demands full disclosure

Klaus Barbie, as chief of the Gestapo in Lyon, in southeast France, from 1942 through 1944 was a master-butcher of humans. There were war criminals in the Nazi apparatus, convicted at Nuremberg and elsewhere and escaping justice, who convincingly were more vile, but largely because of the numbers rather than the quality of the atrocities for which they were responsible. Among the charges Barbie now faces in France are the death by torturing of Jean Moulin, a hero of the French resistance, and the transportation of 43 Jewish children to Auschwitz, to be killed.

Common decency and the vital hope that the human race can be made more responsible by acts of justice declare that Barbie's prosecution is a noble cause.

Why so long in coming? Now 69, he was extradited to France last February from Bolivia, where he had been living prosperously, incognito — having been taken to South America by U.S. intelligence officials more than 30 years before.

Why? As part of his compensation for serving ostensible U.S. intelligence interests from the end of World War II through 1948 or after.

Since Barbie was tracked down and returned to France, the story of his immediate post-war life has been transpiring in bits and pieces, anecdotes and interviews. There are gaps, there are still-secret official records, there are conflicting accounts. With those beclouding the full proportions of the story, however, it is increasingly clear that U.S. counterintelligence officials, fully aware of Barbie's role as a Gestapo chief butcher, took him on as an agent, giving him cover, income and comfort — and then spiriting him secretly away to presumed anonymity in South America.

They were difficult times, the immediate post-war era in continental Europe. The Soviet shadow was cast across all Europe, and America quite rightly was doing all that could be — and might have done more — to prevent other nations from going the way that East Germany did, and Hungary

and Czechoslovakia and so on. Surely, the clear truths of today would mark it as a historic failure if Italy or France, Greece or Turkey — or other nations which were saved from Soviet domination — were now in the political position of Poland or Bulgaria.

Granting that, however, does not grant that official American complicity after the fact to Nazi war crimes could be condoned, morally or in international law, without the most compelling reasons.

The story of the Barbie case, or what of it is known publicly now, doesn't begin to make such a case. His usefulness, at best, seems to have been in supplying information about French communists and potential subversion in Germany. At least two former U.S. counterintelligence officers have told interviewers that they found his contributions less than valuable and his background appalling — and protested to their superiors, only to be rebuffed.

The implications range from dismaying irresponsibility at some middle-level to the gravest complicity at high levels in the U.S. government.

The Justice Department's office of special investigations for war crimes is studying the matter, with the promise of a public report within the next few weeks. The prosecution in France must go forward without interference. History and the deepest moral values demand that the full story be established beyond doubt or conjecture. Dead or alive, those who were responsible must be identified and held to the account of history.

If there is the slightest doubt of the fullness of the report from Justice, the President — and failing that, the Congress — should appoint a study group of impeccable credentials and the necessary powers to open official records and take testimony, to produce a full record of the Barbie case. George Santayana's famous aphorism that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" carries its greatest moral weight when applied to official atrocities. To remember, first a civilization must know.